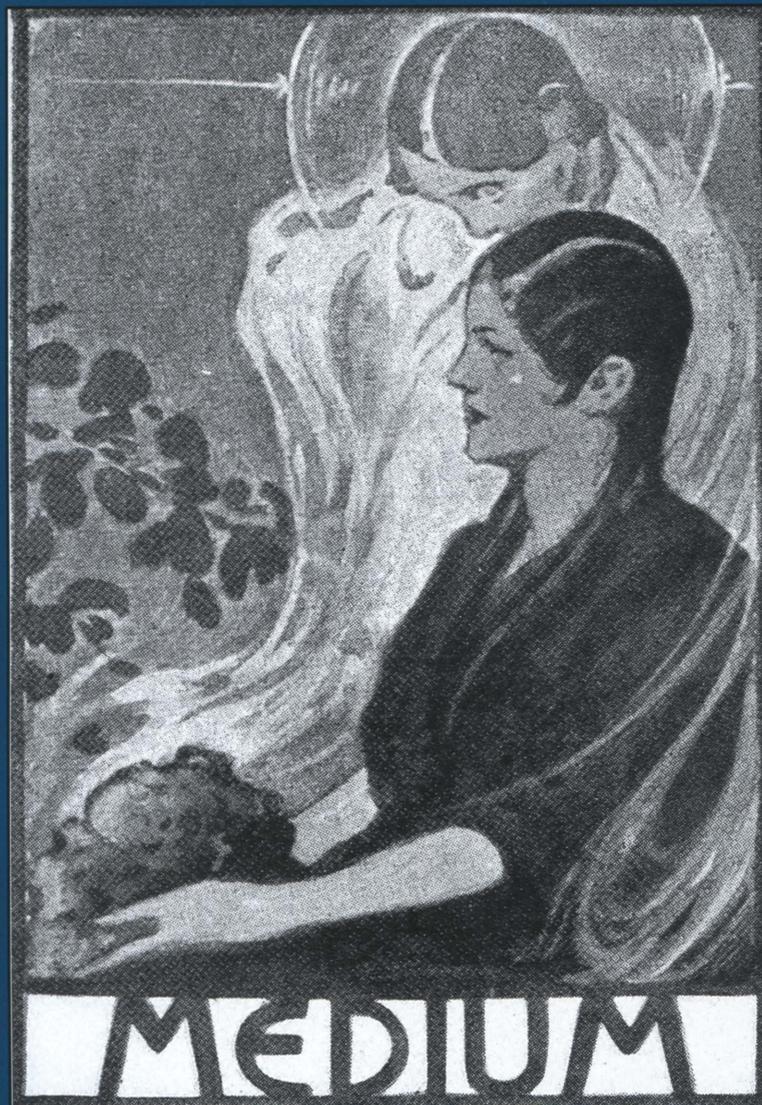


Volume 21 Number 4  
Winter 2008

# The **Skeptic**



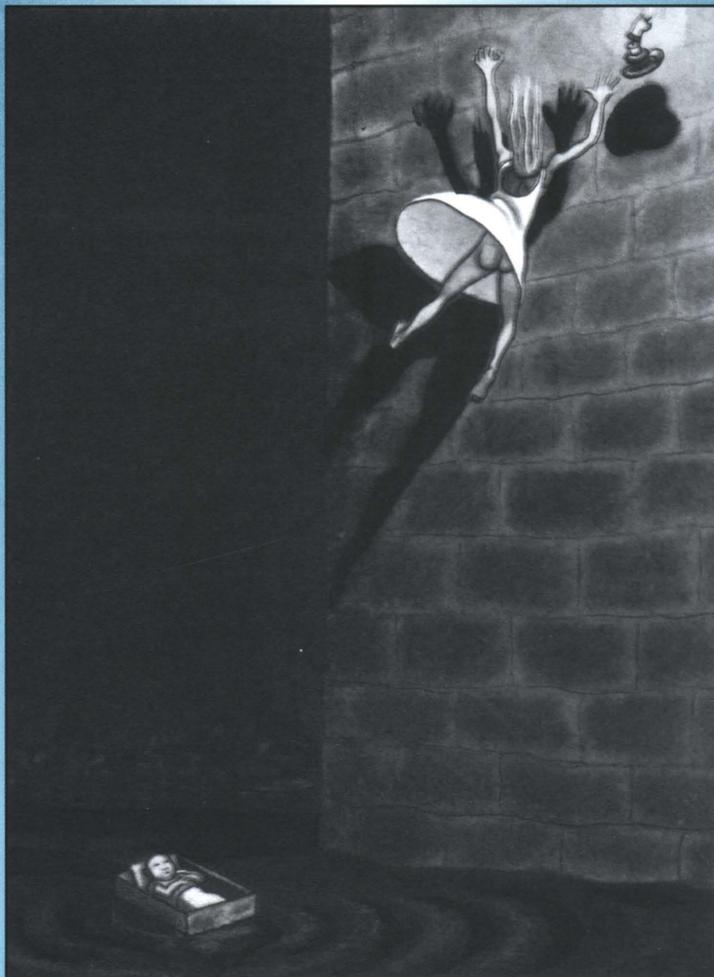
## **The Sceptical Medium: A Course in Crossing Over**

*Also in this issue:*

**The Messengers of Lily Dale: An Analysis  
of Modern Spiritualist Mediums**

*Plus:* News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour

## *Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery*



### **Dreaming of Falling**

“Dreams of falling usually indicate insecurity in an area of worldly ambition, such as a profession or social milieu,” writes David Fontana, but reassures us that “dreamers rarely report distress when hitting the ground; they either wake just in time, or find the ground to be soft and yielding.” Freud, of course, preferred a sexual interpretation, but then he would, wouldn't he...

Hilary Evans is co-proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library, 59 Tranquil Vale, London SE3 OBS.



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# Editorial

Lindsay Kallis and Chris French



**QUITE OFTEN** people ask us: What does the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit study? Well, the explanation usually starts, we study a wide range of ostensibly paranormal phenomena, which usually includes those things that people consider 'weird' about human experience: e.g., ESP, PK, life after death, and so on. We're not *primarily* interested in answering the question of *whether* these phenomena exist, although we do sometimes test such claims directly (e.g., dowsing, telepathy, precognition). But rather, we are focused on understanding *why* people believe these things, *how* they believe them, and what psychological functions they may serve, as well as the possible underlying neuropsychological architecture of these belief systems. Ok, people usually wonder, but what are the implications of this work? Why do you do it? Sure, a lot of it is quirky and fun, but we see it as knowledge being gathered about the human experience; how evolution, history, and culture have given shape to human belief systems about what we believe to be true – or false, for that matter. We see and experience the world in an infinite variety of ways. Take, for instance, young earth creationism and the naturalistic theory of evolution. One explanation of how life came to be superimposes a deity who had the ingenuity to design and create the world as we know it today topped off with a wondrous pinnacle: us. Or the naturalistic explanation: About 13.7 billion years ago the universe began and the earth itself is thought to have formed 4.5 billion years ago. Life was around by 3.5 billion years ago. Through a vastly complicated interplay of environmental pressures, life-forms diverged over these billions of years to result in the world we see today. Oh, and we just so happen to be one of those life branches; nothing divinely created here.

We are discovering things about the way we create our worldview, or in the original German '*weltanschauung*', that seem to be rather relevant to society. Although 'supernatural' and 'paranormal' are two words with their own distinct meanings, they overlap by way of assuming an unnatural force or agency in the world as we currently understand it. Be it gods, the afterlife, ESP, or dowsing, the implication of these beliefs is important to society. Until recently, with authors such as Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and Dennet helping to lead the way, the questioning of the validity and necessity of religious beliefs has been left out of popular western culture. Religion was granted a veil of protection against questioning. Recent polls indicate that somewhere between 500 and

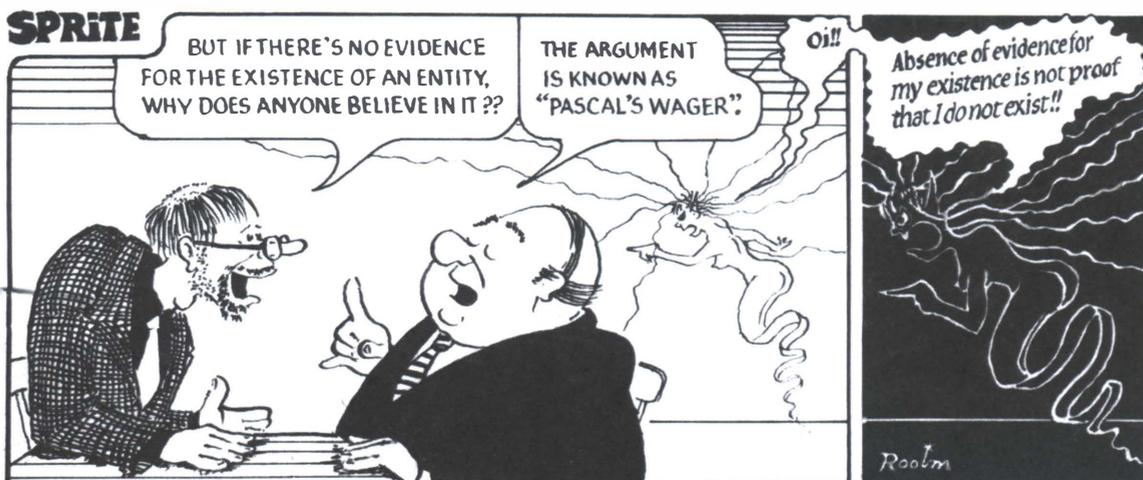
750 million people in the world do not subscribe to a religious doctrine. This puts secularists, atheists, and agnostics in the fourth largest 'belief' group after Christianity (2 billion), Islam (1.2 billion), and Hinduism (900 million). This is hardly an insignificant crowd.

And we're beginning to notice a shift in how a naturalistic worldview is making its way into popular culture. There's a vast amount of resources and communities growing for those wanting to be a part of this movement. From online sources such as the ever-intelligent and thought-provoking *Skepchick* ([www.skepchick.org](http://www.skepchick.org)), and podcasts like *Little Atoms* and *Skeptics Guide to the Universe*, to meet-up groups such as *Skeptics in the Pub* and *Drinking Skeptically*, and a wide variety of sceptically minded scientific books such as *Bad Science* by Ben Goldacre and *Trick or Treatment* by Simon Singh and Edzard Ernst, it is clear that this is an area of significant growth. In a world in which wars are fought over supposed holy land, and billions of pounds are made based on unscrupulous medical claims, it seems that a dose of scepticism and a lesson from nature might do us all a little good.

This brings us back to the research that we are currently undertaking at the APRU. Individuals and groups with a notable absence of religious faith, or a non-paranormal *weltanschauung*, are generally overlooked in research. Quite often 'non-believers' (in a variety of phenomena) are lumped together as those that score low on scales designed to measure a presence of belief, but we feel that there is more to know about this group of people. What would the world look like if there were no gods, no supernatural, no paranormal? Would we really descend into a pit of immoral depravity and lose all sense of purpose and meaning in life as some have conjectured? Or could we have the chance to thrive? The world truly is an awe-inspiring place, but for many of us that sense of wonder and humbleness comes not from a place of faith, but from our naturalistic *weltanschauung* (if you need evidence of this, just watch the BBC's *Planet Earth* for a quick refresher).

In this issue both Jon Donni and Ben Radford recount their personal experiences with 'the other side' and put themselves in positions to try to better understand and explain why it is people hold onto their paranormal and supernatural beliefs with such vigour.

With best wishes,  
Lindsay and Chris



# Hits and Misses

Mark Williams



## Standing room only

When I first heard of the Atheist Bus Campaign, I was quite amused. Launched back in October, the campaign is essentially a joint venture from the British Humanist Association and Richard Dawkins, attempting to add balance to the religious propaganda which frequently appears on London public transport.

The campaign takes the form of a large red, yellow and pink poster plastered to the side of London's buses, proudly proclaiming "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

Frankly, the posters are quite tricky to miss but if you don't live in the capital then you can be forgiven for not having heard of them until now. Despite having exceeded the original £5,500 target (which Dawkins agreed to match, pound for pound) by around £140,000 at the time of writing, the original intention was to adorn only 30 buses (of the 8000 vehicles operating on London's 700 different routes each day) for one month. The campaign has however, become a lot bigger than initially expected. The British Humanist Association released a statement only a few days ago which officially launched the campaign in over 24 other locations and stated the adverts had already run on 800 buses, the London Underground and "two large LCD screens on Oxford Street".

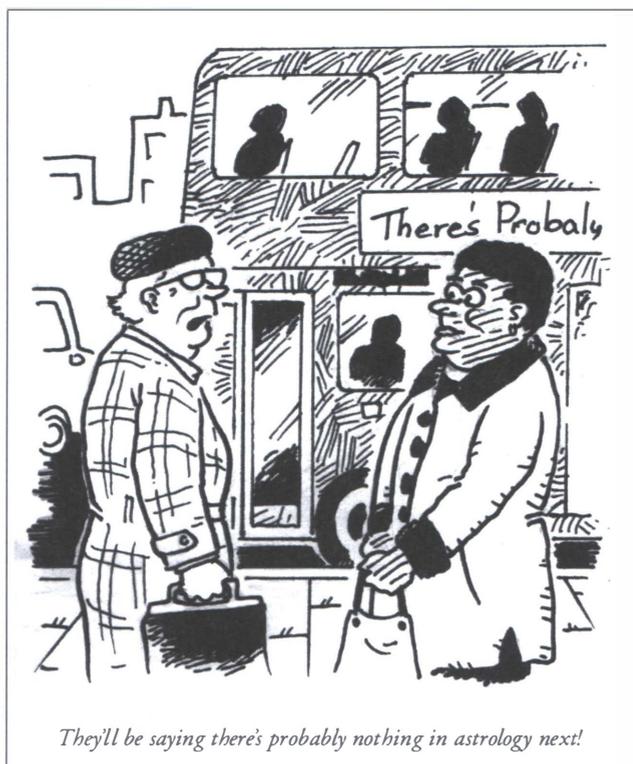
Now I realise that criticising the first ever atheist advertising campaign is unlikely to be particularly popular, especially when said campaign involves the Patron Saint of Atheism Himself, but to be honest, I don't understand it.

I like the concept, it's quaint and catchy; but if the slogan is truly to intended to stop people from worrying about the existence of God, in my opinion it has failed. It's a great way to catch media attention and to perhaps make atheism a point of discussion but that's all. I don't believe anyone will walk away from the poster with a new confidence in the world and I certainly don't believe it will make anyone question their faith.

While Alpha Course and other religious posters adorn the London transport system forcefully promoting all manner of books, seminars and revivals where God may be discovered, the atheist alternative simply offers a worry-free life, safe in the knowledge that there "probably is no God". I don't find that a convincing line and I'm not sure anyone else should either. My views about religion are based on my experiences and upbringing, the company I keep, but importantly also the available evidence. The Bible offers no substantial evidence for belief in a divine creator especially when considered against the available criticism. I won't proclaim my approach to the topic has ever been neutral

but the slogan does nothing to prompt theists to question their beliefs. If anything, the direction to "stop worrying and enjoy your life" is more akin to one of the Ten Commandments.

In discussing the slogan with another atheist, I was reminded of an exchange between James Randi and Chris French in an interview earlier this year. Towards the end of the interview (which should appear in print in the next issue, and online as a video around the same time), Randi volunteered: "All I want is just to get people thinking. Have them ask questions, have them think about what I have told them. Don't believe me any more than you believe these other people who make these claims. I'm making a claim too; it may not be true, investigate it, think about it." French echoed the same sentiment in return, saying: "The bottom line is,



just think for yourselves, question everything. Question what I'm telling you and look at the evidence".

## Simon says

In the spirit of mobilising community members, the RSPCA also issued a statement in October urging the Church to consider and celebrate animals as it places new emphasis on making "Time for God's Creation". Seeking to promote awareness of, and a responsible attitude towards, animal suffering, the RSPCA's press release states "Many people tend to think that animal abuse happens at the hands of just a few, but in truth as

a society we need to think far more deeply about how our lifestyle impacts on animals and how we may be, directly or indirectly, permitting suffering”.

The call was timed to coincide with Animal Welfare Sunday (5<sup>th</sup> October 2008), while the RSPCA also published a “Service for Animal Welfare booklet, written by Professor Linzey, complete with prayers, readings and liturgies”. It would seem that Prof. Linzey is no stranger to animal ethics or religion, either. As employee of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, an Anglican priest, vegetarian and first holder of an academic post in Ethics, Theology and Animal Welfare, he is well suited to his role espousing the ethical lifestyle, a topic which is gaining increasing publicity in recent times.

Despite some questionable practices such as a controversial euthanasia policy (a topic which will be returned to at a later date), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have for some time approached celebrities sympathetic to their cause, producing campaigns to increase awareness about ethical lifestyles. Ricky Gervais, for instance, has recently written to Gordon Brown asking if his “office [would] be so good as to prod [the Ministry of Defence] with a stick” as they are reluctant to discontinue the use of black bearskin for their Guards’ ceremonial caps. Simon Cowell appeared in a similar campaign stating “If you wouldn’t wear your dog, please don’t wear any fur”. Ironically, single campaigns such as these have a much greater potential for a long-term impact on the attitudes of future generations – Cowell was judged as more famous than either God or the Queen, coming top in a poll of 1600 children under ten.

### Frankenstein’s microchip

Few will forget the image of the Vacanti mouse – the unfortunate rodent which, in 1997, received attention from world media due to the ear-shaped cartilage structure artificially created on its back. Since then, there have been developments towards the creation of human-animal hybrid embryos, with the Human Fertility Embryology (HFE) Bill passing its final reading in the House of Commons in October 2008, nearly two years after motions for the outlawing of such embryo research, with a majority of almost two to one.

Although the HFE will permit the creation of three types of hybrid embryo for stem cell research it is, remarkably, not the most striking development in recent times (not to mention the Roman Catholic Church calling for women to be permitted to give birth to human-animal hybrids, according to the *Times*). Researchers working on a project termed *NACHIP* at the Max Planck Institute for Biochemistry have successfully created a neuro-semiconductor interface. In essence, they managed to integrate living mammalian neurons and silicone in a new microchip. Fused to the microchip with proteins found naturally in the brain, electrical signals pass bi-directionally through the neu-

ronal ionic channels. Once refined, the technology could enable the development of much more sophisticated drug screening methodology and, potentially, genetically powered hard discs. It’s perhaps not as sensational as a woman giving birth to a dog but it’s just as interesting.

### A shot in the dark

The opportunity to criticise anything children hold dear gives me a warm, fuzzy, glow inside, and nothing epitomises the strict morality advocated by 1950’s childhood legends more than the Lone Ranger. Aside from Silver (who was quite clearly the unsung star of the show), one of the Lone Ranger’s trademarks (or more aptly, gimmicks) was his fashioned silver bullet



which, as you’ve probably guessed, is just inaccurate.

The idea that the Lone Ranger could perhaps cast his own bullets or at least acquire them effortlessly simply doesn’t match the reality. Without a high heat resistant graphite mould from which to cast the rounds, it would be almost impossible to heat the silver to its melting point of 962 degrees Celsius to obtain a clean, shiny bullet, a fact *Gun World* staff discovered when they attempted this. They encountered similar problems when trying to find the correct mix of gunpowder to weight the bullet while maintaining an accurate shot.

The resulting article entitled *Lone Ranger, Go Away* is a lengthy analysis of their attempts and failures to forge silver bullets with typical tools. In short, if you’re an enthusiast wishing to re-enact scenes from the popular television program (or an assassin looking for a classy calling card), I’d suggest giving up on forging ammunition by campfire and using electrolysis as a method to obtain a silver-plated bullet instead.

Any new stories and newspaper clippings are gladly received and read, as are your opinions. *The Skeptic* would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine’s current address, listed on p. 3. If you would like to contribute links and updates directly to the *Skeptic’s* blog ([ukskeptic.livejournal.com](http://ukskeptic.livejournal.com)), please email for information.

## Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



**I AM NOT** an alcoholic. That, in my view, means that I am far less qualified to comment on the workings of Alcoholics Anonymous than Steven Mohr, whose two-part article critique of AA ran recently in *The Skeptic*. Mohr has been to hundreds of AA meetings; I went to a modest number of open meetings in the early 1980s – so clearly I’m entirely an amateur.

However. One of the odd things you can be good at as a lifelong non-drinker (which I am) is to be company for people who through desire or necessity have abruptly quit drinking. I’ve known some of these both in my years as a full-time folksinger and since.

The idea that giving up booze entirely is the only alternative to dying or going mad is not, I think, something AA made up. Certainly, the person who first gave me that answer to the question, “Why did you stop drinking?” had been in AA. But he didn’t cite AA as the evidence for the assertion; he cited the example of his father and grandfather, whom he’d watched lurch through those things. Most of the people I’ve known who were serious drinkers – they never called themselves alcoholics so it’s difficult for me to apply the label – have died in their 40s or early 50s. Sober friends of mine tell me this is a common pattern.

In my limited experience, AA groups vary considerably in their approach to such religious trappings as prayer and god. The Higher Power that upset Mohr so much is left for individual members to define as they see fit. The 12 steps simply say “God as we understand Him”. I don’t see why secularists can’t choose as the object of faith the simple possibility of living sober as exemplified by the group of people they’re seeing at meetings. “Take what you need and leave the rest” is another AA dictum that seems perfectly applicable here.

True, many American groups (in my limited experience) wind up meetings by reciting the Lord’s prayer; but an alcoholic offended by that can certainly start a new group that doesn’t. The serenity prayer, which as far as I can tell appears throughout AA and its relatives, is, in my view, too valuable as a concept to dump – but it seems to me to carry far less religious baggage.

I have always thought, therefore, that getting tangled up in complaining about AA’s particular brand of non-denomination is a side-issue. It seems to me no worse than the unwanted side effects that accompany most pharmaceutical medicines. If your need is strong enough, you take it even if it causes dizziness, drowsiness, stomach problems, or liver damage.

The people I’ve known in AA have been drawn to it because they found recognisable truth there. One sober alcoholic of my acquaintance said that the thing that stopped him in his tracks was by meeting an unassailable contradiction: a former drinking buddy, now sober – and happy. It

was the happiness that sent his brain into mental fugue because, he said, “if there was one thing he knew as a drinker it was that if you were sober you were miserable”. The friend led him to AA, which he embraced despite being as violently anti-religious as anyone can be. (He has now been sober for nearly 30 years). Another went to meetings because AA’s hotline gave him valuable advice for dealing with his physical condition when he abruptly quit drinking after a bad scare. The fact that their advice worked gave him trust that they might be able to help with other aspects of his condition; he’s now been sober for more than ten years.

Yes, the plural of anecdote is not data. You cannot judge AA’s effectiveness by the handful of cases you personally know, and I don’t think the organisation has ever claimed a very high success rate. The concept of alcoholics helping each other came about because all previous attempts had failed badly: psychiatry, religion, medicine. Does Mohr have something better to suggest?

“If you want what we have,” the *Big Book* says, “and are willing to go to any lengths to get it...” Well, if the quasi-religious trappings offend you that much you don’t want enough what AA has. Turn off the channel and move on.

I don’t think a measure of AA’s effectiveness should be, as some have suggested, that members be able to drink in moderation. If I were an alcoholic who had jeopardized or ruined my life, my work, my relationships, and my health because of drink, would I want to have the occasional glass of wine just to prove a point to commentators who cared nothing about me? Certainly not. If you’ve finally got your life to where it ain’t broke, why try to prove it’s fixed?

I’m more in agreement with Mohr that courts ordering participation in 12-step programmes is a problem because that seems likely create many failures for AA. As I understand it, the fundamental driver behind making AA work is the alcoholic’s own desire to change. Few people want to change just because someone orders them to.

But a dangerous religious cult? AA charges no tithes, it imposes no requirements on its members except for a desire to stop drinking; it makes no efforts to alienate members from the people in their lives other than in the interests of staying sober; and it does not treat former members as pariahs. Do you really want to class AA members with the cults that led to Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate? People who seek medical treatment for cancer also show varying success rates; does that make medicine a dangerous cult, or merely the best we have for a bad situation?

A sober friend said once that the best thing Bill W. and Dr Bob ever did for alcoholics was to die sober, because doing so proved it’s possible to stay sober for life. May Mohr die sober.

Wendy M Grossman is founder and former editor of *The Skeptic*. Her web site is at [www.pelicancrossing.net](http://www.pelicancrossing.net).

# The Sceptical Medium: A Course in Crossing Over

**Jon Donni** recounts his experience at a mediumship training school

FOR THOSE of you who haven't heard of me, my name is Jon Donni and Derek Acorah once referred to me as "The UK's Most Famous Internet Sceptic", although I suspect he did so while laughing maniacally in a tub full of dirty cash. I own the popular site *BadPsychics.com* where our main aim is to expose fraudulent psychics and mediums, and find out the truth behind any such paranormal claims. But this article will not be about exposing a medium, instead I would like to tell you about my very own experience of training to be a medium!

## The challenge

The story starts in March 2005, and I was very much your loud-mouthed, armchair-sceptic know-it-all. You know the sort, all talk and no bananas. Making a lot of noise within various sceptical circles, I found myself invited onto a pilot radio show hosted by medium Becky Walsh. I traveled to the professional radio studio in London where I met another guest on the show, a medium by the name of Kendra Whitty, and sparks flew as we discussed various aspects of the paranormal and specifically mediumship. I found that I could hold my own in the argument, except for one point, and that was: How could I call it all rubbish if I had never even tried it myself? The challenge was laid down to me, so how could I refuse?

## Week one

A few weeks later, when I turned up at Kendra's centre of mediumship, I was asked to do just two things: firstly to have an open mind, which was easy as I am a sceptic, not a cynic; and secondly to leave my cynic's hat at the door – again, easy. She claimed that during the time I would spend with her in the class and through a number of personal readings, she would not only prove to me the existence of mediumship, but also have me demonstrate some psychic/mediumship abilities of my own. The idea of this excited me as it would anyone as I was practically guaranteed proof that had eluded me my whole life. I have to admit that I was surprised at the mix of people in the class as I had some preconceived notions of the kind of people who would be there: either young blinkered Derek Acorah fans, or elderly women. In fact, there was a nice cross section of society, from young to old, male and female. So I was pleasantly surprised, even if I was the only person there with any kind of ethnic origin.

After a brief talk by Kendra, we prepared for our first task of the evening which would help us understand exactly how a medium receives messages, and how dif-

ficult it is to interpret those messages in a way to pass the message onto a client/recipient. The task involved a person acting as the medium, a person acting as the recipient for the message, and whoever was left would act as the spirits passing on the messages. Of course Kendra decided it would be fun to choose me as the medium, and to be fair I would expect nothing less. After all, Kendra wanted me to truly understand, so why not throw me in at the deep end? I stood in the centre of the stage area while the recipient sat on a chair in the audience area, and those who were acting as the spirits stood behind me with the rest of the classmates dotted about in the 'audience'. It was explained to me that different 'spirits' would give me information in different ways. Some would show me pictures, which would demonstrate clairvoyance, some would touch me and instruct me regarding how I should be feeling,

**The story starts in March 2005,  
and I was very much your  
loud-mouthed,  
armchair-sceptic know-it-all**

which would demonstrate clairsentience and, finally, some would talk to me, which would demonstrate clairaudience.

As I began, I was shown various images, I was touched in certain places, and had whispers in my ear. All of which I had to interpret and try and to pass on to the recipient. The recipient had in front of them a piece of paper and written on it was a description of the person I would be trying to pass on knowledge and evidence of. If we are to accept the word of mediums, then this would be the best way to understand the difficulties they face, and go some way to explain why many readings are vague. I hate to admit it but I felt a strong urge to "ham it up" in true Derek Acorah style, and at times Kendra was visibly annoyed with my overacting,

but I think I did well. I was able to pass on a message successfully, which to my mind proved that maybe it wasn't all as hard as it was made out.

### Week two

A week passed and the next class was upon me and, as usual before the lessons started, people would mingle, chat about things and generally chill out. As a social experience I can see the benefits of such a place as it allows people to mix with other like-minded people who have probably shared similar experiences without the fear of ridicule.

I sat down on my own, and was later joined by a middle-aged man with whom I chatted. He asked me if I had any idea what we might be doing in that day's lesson. One thing Kendra made sure of is that no one knew what he or she would be doing. I proceeded to tell the man that we would be doing psychometry, but to be honest I had no idea. I was pleasantly chuffed with myself when moments later Kendra entered and said loudly, "This week we will be doing some psychometry". I had to have a chuckle to myself.

As the first part of the class started, Kendra showed us a sealed bubble wrap envelope that had multiple items inside that only she knew the identity of. She then proceeded to call everyone up to hold the envelope by his or her fingertips and 'psychically' decide what was inside. My 'guess' was of some kind of clock. There were various guesses by the class, and some of the correct guesses included a candle and a pen (although the pen was actually a feather). Kendra also revealed a mobile phone with a large digital clock display on the outside. Of course she refused to let me have that one, even though I do use my own mobile phone as a clock as I refuse to wear a watch. Either way, I am counting it as my second hit of the night after the psychometry prediction.

Finally, we were split up, with a group of six of us on stage while the rest (about 20 people) sat in the audience area. One by one, we stepped forward out of the line and emptied our minds and basically said whatever thoughts popped into our heads; luckily for me my dirty mind wasn't in gear or else it could have been a problem! Now what happened next is slightly strange. It came to my turn and, as I emptied my mind of thoughts, describing the first images that came to me, I saw a green racing car with the number 21 clearly on it. I repeated this to the audience and one man raised his hand and said that he had been given a green racing car model/toy with the number 21 on it. Now even I have to admit at being slightly surprised at this as it was easily the most impressive piece of 'evidence' of the whole evening, if not the whole course.

Did I cheat? No.

Was there any way I could've known the information in advance? No.

So how did I know? Personally I will put it down to blind luck, chance, or coincidence. For all I know the person who accepted the 'link' was lying or simply had

a false memory of such a toy. I did though find myself in a position I had never been in before, a position of genuine uncertainty. I was then asked to look specifically at one girl in the audience area and to try and give her some kind of message or information. At this point I held my hand to my ear and simply stated I was getting 'ears'. Looking slightly shocked, she then stated that her father was deaf. Another hit! Well not quite, all I had said was ears; she is the one who has interpreted it as meaning 'deaf', so even though to an outsider it may seem impressive, I do not consider it so.

The evening came to a close and, to a believer, I had easily given at least three examples of genuine psychic ability, whereas for me I would state that only one was even interesting, that being the green racing car. What



*Although the focus of BadPsychics.com is often exposing fake psychics and mediums, that is not the focus of the current article*

about the things I got wrong? I talked about something on the right wrist of a man to the same girl I mentioned ears to, but she could not match it to anything. Yet I got that as strongly if not more strongly than I got 'ears' or the racing car. Why should I be right on one thing but wrong on another? If my mediumship were authentic then there is no reason why I should be getting misses like that.

I left that evening knowing that I had, in a way, proved a point. But as I drove home I was unsure of

which point I had made. Could it be that I proved that someone with zero psychic abilities such as myself could enter a class of 30-odd students and provide the best apparent evidence of psychic ability? Or could it be that even the most hardened of sceptics such as myself can be open to spirit communication? For now, I think I will go with the first hypothesis: I have to admit that it is a striking feeling when you 'give' apparent evidence of spirit survival, and I can understand how someone who was already inclined to believe, if put in my position, could really convince themselves that they were psychic just from a couple of lucky guesses. And it is that which I believe to be dangerous. We know that the brain can manifest feelings, even hallucinations, when someone is delusional, and it can be quite easy to convince yourself you are hearing voices when it is just your imagination. The second week was now over and I was still a sceptic; I had seen no concrete evidence of psychic ability, not from me or from anyone involved in the class.

### **I could easily be deluding myself right now that I was really psychic and connecting to spirit**

#### **Week three**

After everyone had arrived for the third week we were told that the people from the intermediate class would be joining us newbies as the intermediate teacher was not there. This week's lessons would centre on psychic readings and spirit communication, with the intermediate students watching over and helping us as well as noting down our hits and misses. I was partnered up with a lady with whom I had spoken briefly a few times before, and an intermediate whom I shall call 'John', who would be watching over things. We started off and my partner gave me her watch to hold which would help me forge a psychic link to her. I was then told to concentrate and allow my mind to clear. When I felt something come to me, I was to say it out loud where my partner would say a simple 'yes' or 'no', and then John would record the result on a piece of paper. My first statement was that the woman came from a Catholic family, and it was a hit. A great start! I then stated that I was getting an Irish connection and that I

believed she had Irish in her family. Another hit, although I was dubious about my own claim since I had already stated she came from a Catholic family. But either way, it was a hit. I followed this up with three more very specific hits! What's going on here? Am I really psychic? Well no, I followed up with many misses and in the end things evened themselves up. I suppose a believer receiving the information could quite easily ignore the misses and only remember the hits, and in fact, we know that this cognitive bias does occur in readings.

Next it was time for my partner to give me a psychic reading, but me being the professional sceptic, I had no personal items on me, no watch, no jewellery, I had even borrowed the car I drove in. So in the end we agreed she could hold my hand instead. It is worth noting how warm her hands were. Mine were freezing and, to be honest, I half-expected her to say she 'felt' that I had bad circulation, but to her credit she didn't. I have to admit feeling pretty bad for what happened next, as it was pretty much miss after miss. I even felt the urge to say 'yes' just to help ease her embarrassment; I guess that is how it feels when you are face to face with Derek Acorah or Colin Fry and they are doing badly and you could almost feel obliged to say 'yes' as you feel sorry for the person. Anyway, I digress. She continued with my reading and got a few vague hits but nothing substantial.

Next it was time for the 'spirit communication' part of the evening. My partner went first this time, and unfortunately it went pretty much the way of her psychic reading, in that she didn't seem to connect with anyone. In fact, the person she described was very stereotypical of someone you would expect me to know, and to be fair I do know people who fit the description; the only problem was, none of them were dead. And when she finished by saying that they were Muslim I felt slightly annoyed. It would appear that she had assumed I was Muslim by my appearance, and had subconsciously 'created' this person based on what I look like: I am quite darkly tanned for a Greek and I am often mistaken for being of Asian origin, especially when I have just returned from holiday. Either way, I informed her she was wrong, and despite the desperate attempts of John, she accepted it and it was my turn next.

The previous week I had done very well when put on the stage to give out spirit communication, so I had high hopes that I would do well here, but unfortunately I did worse than my partner's reading of me. I was honest in what I believed was coming to me, but the fact that I was completely wrong on absolutely everything I described about an apparent dead relative of hers, helped prove to me that what I had received was purely from my imagination. After I had finished, the intermediate mediumship student, John, then took my hand and gave me a psychic reading, but I was very disappointed at what happened next. He blatantly used cold reading to expand on things he had found out only moments earlier. This is the first time I had witnessed anyone from the centre using this technique and to say

it annoyed me is an understatement. At the time I just put it to the back of my mind and tried to forget about it, as he wasn't a part of my group so I didn't think it concerned me.

After everyone had finished their various readings, it was time for the intermediates to strut their stuff. They all took to the stage area while everyone else sat in the audience area. And guess which one got to go first? Yes, it was John who had read for me earlier on. Because of my earlier experience with him, I wanted to make sure I was right about his 'techniques' so I watched him intensely and noted every word he uttered and motion

to Kendra, and although she did not agree with my assessment of John, she has accepted it as my opinion. The only saving grace I can see is that Kendra is not the teacher of the intermediates, she is the teacher of the beginners, and so far I have not seen anyone use cold reading or any cheating techniques at all, and that includes Kendra.

A very difficult week overall for all concerned, not only for me, having been put in a position where I was witnessing cheating (either on purpose or not), but also for Kendra as ultimately she was the person in charge there and everything that goes on, whether her doing or



*Mr. and Mrs. James Coates conducting an experiment in psychometry around 1900. She is seeking to read the content of the envelope by extrasensory means.*

he made, as well as those of any person he spoke to in the crowd. What I witnessed next disappointed me even more. It was as if he had read Ian Rowland's book on the art of cold reading. I was so close to walking out right there, but I truly didn't want to disappoint Kendra who had put so much trust and faith in me, so I stayed. After John had finished, the various other intermediates did their readings and all of them were doing pretty much the same thing as John but not to the same level. Most of them looked distinctly uncomfortable and out of place up on the stage.

As you can imagine, I was now in a very difficult position as I had seen blatant cold reading. What should I do? I decided to speak with Kendra as soon as the class finished but was unable to go into details because of other people about and needing to get home, so I told her I would speak with her after I had gotten home. I described my experience and what I had seen

not, is her responsibility.

#### **Week four**

Week four came around very quickly, and as the class gathered we were informed we would be doing something called 'scrying'. For those who don't know, scrying is where you look at or feel a 'prop' and use it to connect either psychically or spiritually to someone else. The type of scrying we were to do involved a glass bowl filled with water. One person would leave the room while another person (unknown to the first person) would place their hand in the water for a few minutes. Then, after they had returned to their seat, the first person would come back out, put their own hand in the water, and try and psychically pick up on something about the first person.

Of course, and as expected, I was chosen to go first and I was happy to be shut into a closed room while

someone placed their hand in the water. When I came back out, I walked over to where the bowl was positioned and placed my own hand in the water. After a minute or so of concentration I then started to say whatever thoughts came into my head. At no point would I be facing the audience, and nor would I hear any response from them as it would all be done through Kendra who would receive a positive nod or negative shake of the head from the person concerned. Firstly, I came up with 'sadness', and as my back was facing the audience, I still could not see who would accept or

was 'connecting' with one of the young ladies in the class, but to my surprise I had connected with a man called Nick.

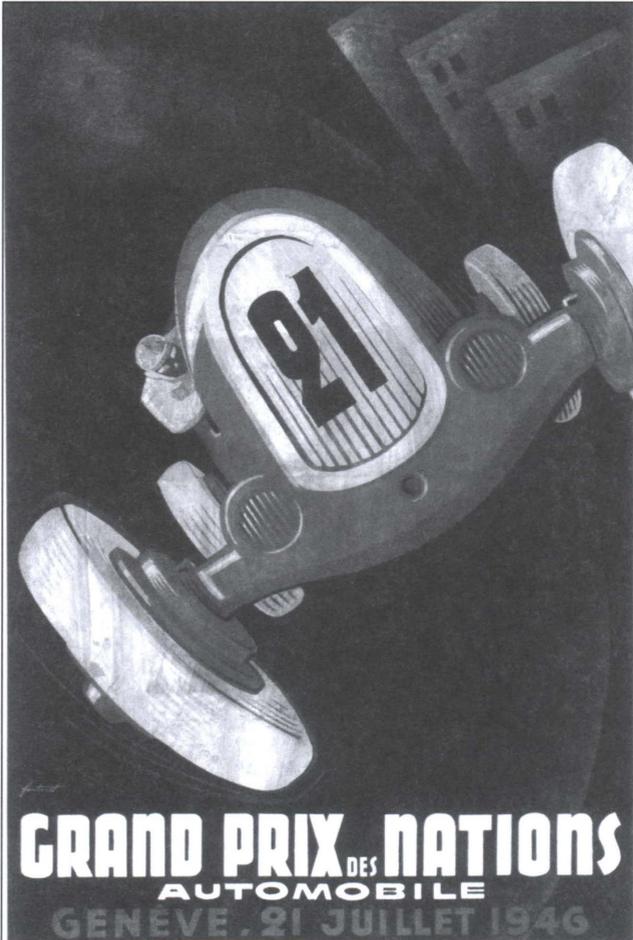
He then described that he likes to bake and does it all of the time, which is not something you would probably guess about him as he is over 6 foot tall, with a shaven bald head and a large build. Next he stated that his girlfriend's friend has Jack Russells that she walks regularly (that I class as being quite a tenuous link). He then revealed that she was enrolling her son in the Boy's Brigade, which is where the scouts/marching connection comes in. I would class this as a hit because I clearly stated that it was marching, and it involved a scout-like movement and not the army.

He then suddenly remembered that his girlfriend is named 'Cally'. The teacher seemed impressed as I had initially said 'Sally', which *is* pretty close, but I remain unsure on this one. As soon as you start changing letters it makes it easier to fit things together which is not strong enough evidence for me. Either way, I would class the scrying as a success as I did do well, but the question is: how do you interpret the results I achieved? I could easily explain away every single hit I got, but that would be counterproductive at this time.

Now it was the turn of someone else to take part in the scrying. A man was taken out of the room, I volunteered to put my hand in the water to see if he could pick up anything about me. Unfortunately, the results were extremely negative and I found myself shaking my head for pretty much everything he said. The only thing he got close was when he said he was picking up a strong-minded perhaps overbearing person, and the teacher revealed in this opportunity to exclaim that he was right without even asking me, which is a shame, because outside of this kind of work I am known as being quite a shy person, but I didn't want to spoil the fun.

Next up was a young lady who was led from the room while another lady placed her hand in the water. When she returned, the young lady placed her hand in the water and started to say what came to her, and what happened next was quite funny: pretty much everything she said could've applied to me, but what was also interesting was that the person she was supposed to be connecting with also agreed that what she was saying applied to her. So when the other man who had previously tried to connect to me then revealed that nearly everything applied to him too, we found ourselves at an impasse.

The problem we had was that three different people could all accept what she had said. Of course, this plays straight into what I know about these things and it proved that certain things can apply to many different people, not unlike Barnum statements that are used in cold reading. The three of us all come from very different backgrounds, and independently you would not associate any of us with each other. Because of this, the young woman was asked to repeat the scrying but with someone else. She left the room again, a new person placed their hand in the water and the exercise was repeated.



*Why should a green racing car with the number 21 on it come to mind?*

reject anything I said. For saying 'sadness', I got a curt 'no' from the teacher, which strangely would be the last 'no' I would receive during this exercise.

Next, I stated that I was picking up on baking of some kind.

HIT - This was met with an affirmative nod.

Next, I claimed that I could see marching, but not in the sense of the army, more like Scouts, or a similar group.

HIT.

I then mentioned a Jack Russell dog, which at first was met with a negative response but after thinking was changed to a positive one, and so another HIT.

I then said the name Sally. This was again met with an initially negative response.

I had then finished and, to be honest, I suspected I

This time, however, the results were much more negative, which I have to admit was a shame as the young woman is a very genuine honest person and I was hoping she would do well. That brings an end to the scrying, and next we got to do some good old-fashioned stage mediumship. And guess who was chosen to go up first? Yes, it was me again! Anyone see a pattern emerging here?

Up first, I steadied myself and did my best to relax and then genuinely attempted to just let things come to me. Even though I do have a knowledge of cold reading and such techniques, I tried not to use it, and in fact, I always tried to be as specific about things as possible. As I started, I talked about a middle-aged man who had white curly hair, which would've been blond and curly when he was younger.

(Vacant looks from the audience.)

Oh dear, not doing well here. But, me being me, I continued. Now maybe it was because I was nervous or cold, but I did start to shiver and shake slightly, which I mentioned. At this point the teacher asked the audience if anyone could relate to anything I had said, and in true Derek Acorah theatre fashion the whole audience shook their heads: not a sausage! But then, and this is strange for me, I turned to the teacher and asked her straight: "Do you understand?" She replied that she *may* understand but wanted me to tell her more. I then revealed that I was getting an accent, and that I would say this man was not English, but he was white, so definitely western European. The teacher agreed and said that I was right. But she still wanted more!

I stated that this man was from a big family, and had many brothers, and again she gave an affirmative response! I then stated that I could see some kind of dancing, almost like Russian dancing where they kick their legs high in the air, and she told me she could understand that too. That was pretty much it and it seemed I had done very well. The teacher then described whom she believed I was talking about. Her uncle, who had grey curly hair when he died, but it was blond when he was younger. He was one of many brothers but the unusual thing was that the other brothers were all quite darkly tanned with darker hair, whereas he was very pale with blond hair! She revealed that he was of Irish origin, which would fit the western European origin as well as the accent connection. She then revealed that her uncle and his brothers would always dance together and try and outdo each other, and usually kicked their legs high in the air. She also stated that he died of alcoholism, which may have been why I was getting the shakes.

So there we have it. I connected to a relative of the medium and if there is one person who is going to be hard on me it would be her, but she had to admit that I was pretty much spot on with the only discrepancy being the colour of his hair when he was older. But I would point out that when I say 'white-haired' when referring to older people, I use it as a generic term for anyone with greying or white hair.

So let's look at what I achieved that evening. During the scrying, I seemingly got quite a few hits and then on the mediumship I apparently connected to the medium's own uncle. How do I explain these things? Well, to be honest, I could put pretty much everything down to a mixture of vagueness and coincidence. As I have said though, if I was not the logical rational thinking man I am, I could easily be deluding myself right now that I was really psychic and connecting to spirit, but to date I have not seen any evidence that either psychic ability or spirit communication exists.

### Week five

Week five came along very quickly and I soon found out that the medium teaching the intermediate class had to leave for personal reasons, and so the intermediate group would now be mixed in with us. I didn't know at the time that this would be the last week of the normal beginners class and our assessments would be next week which would mean the beginners group would be split up. The people who had shown the most promise would be moved up to the intermediate class, and the rest would move into another group where they could learn about other aspects of spiritualism and psychic ability. I was informed that because of the 'abilities' I had shown, I would be moved to the intermediate group if I was still interested.

As the intermediate group was now mixed with ours, Kendra decided to choose three beginners to join the intermediates on the stage to demonstrate mediumship. As usual, I was first choice, along with two women. An intermediate went first and I don't remember much of the reading that she gave other than that I wasn't too impressed. To be fair, Kendra had not been working with the intermediates, and this was her chance to see how much, if at all, they had developed. After the first woman had done her reading, I was up next! As I took to the front of the stage I looked out at a sea of people. OK, so there were about 20, but it felt like a sea, all with their eyes trained upon me. As usual, I was warned by Kendra not to do any theatrics, not that I would ever act up anyway, although the urge to go all love and light, and start saying darling to everyone was slightly overwhelming.

I stood alone on the stage in silence for a few minutes, trying my best to clear my mind as I really did try my best and at all times did exactly what I was told. Now the next bit is the hard part: I do not hear voices, I do not see faces, I do not communicate with a spirit guide, and so, in theory, this should be impossible. However, I finally 'got' something, and I described an old lady, with very thinning hair on top. I saw a bright wig that I described as blue. A lady in the audience said she could accept it, although the colour of the wig was wrong. I went on to describe a woman who had a tumour in her stomach. Wrong. The lady claimed that she died of old age, but as she didn't know her for the last ten years of her life, she couldn't be certain. At this point the woman sitting next to the original woman

said she could understand what I was saying, and we talked some more but in the end decided that we were with the original woman.

I also described this elderly lady as a miserable, introverted woman, which was again wrong as I was told that this woman was the opposite of that, and I was also told that she had dementia. So far I had got pretty much everything wrong except the original description of thinning hair and a wig. I was pushed by Kendra to give evidence, to describe something about the lady I was talking to. I asked the lady in the crowd if she wore glasses, she said yes. She pulled them out of her bag and said they were reading glasses. Kendra admitted that she didn't know the woman wore glasses. I then went on to say that she had a problem with her sight. She then admitted that she was blind in one of her eyes. There

**. . . more than anything I felt  
as if I could understand better how  
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they were psychic, or even able  
to speak to spirits**

was no way I could know this, and although I wasn't specific, it was interesting if not that impressive.

While I was standing there I noticed that during the whole reading I had been flexing my right hand. I thought this was unusual so I asked the lady if she had been having problems with her right hand. She looked surprised and admitted that she has carpal tunnel syndrome in her right hand. That was the end of the reading and I sat down. The woman seemed impressed with the reading, and Kendra even said I had done well. But when I actually look back on what I said, I was wrong more than I was right. My only real hit being the hand, and maybe the problem with her sight. Neither statement proves any kind of psychic ability, nor does it prove spirit communication. I will admit though that it

was interesting, but after watching the other class members give their readings, none really impressed me. In fact, I would state that I saw no psychic ability demonstrated that evening by any of the members.

That was the end of the class, and my experience of learning how to become a medium. While I had learnt a lot, I remained a sceptic as I had not witnessed anything I deemed paranormal, but more than anything I felt as if I could understand better how someone could convince themselves they were psychic, or even able to speak to spirits. Before the course I was sure that every psychic was a fraud, everyone was involved with prior research, cold reading, and so on, but I learnt the very opposite. Many people do genuinely believe they are the real deal, their belief is not born out of ignorance or stupidity, but more of naivety.

So that is the end of my story, how a hardened sceptic changed his opinions and spent time learning how it really feels to be a medium, which is something not many sceptics out there can say. Being an armchair sceptic is fine, but if you really want to speak with authority you truly need to experience things from the other side of the fence, even if you are not convinced, at least you can say you tried.

However, just one week later I was chatting to Kendra about the course and something very strange happened. She 'accidentally' called me by a three-letter name. Now I won't publish that name here, but it is a shortened down version of my full Greek name. I am known as Jon by everyone in my family, and all my friends know me as Jon too. So how or why would Kendra call me by this name? When she said it, I have to admit I was briefly taken aback. Just when I had decided that she had no real abilities she goes and throws a spanner in the works.

Even to this day I simply have no explanation of how or why she said that three-letter name to me. Did it come from spirit? In her own words, no. Was it psychic? Again, she has admitted she has no idea why she said it or where it came from. Could it be simply an amazing coincidence? Was there some elaborate behind-the-scenes searching done by Kendra? I honestly don't think so.

So now I am left in a place which appears to be no better off than when I started.

Does Kendra communicate with spirit? I don't believe so. Does Kendra cheat? No, I have seen no evidence of her ever cheating in any way. Is Kendra psychic? No, again I don't believe so. Does Kendra genuinely believe in her abilities? In my opinion yes, she does. Can I explain how or why she said that three letter name? No, I can't.

**Jon Donni** was once described by Derek Acorah as the UK's most famous internet sceptic. However, he prefers to refer to himself as simply the man behind the site *BadPsychics.com*, the UK's largest and most popular sceptical website.



# Skeptical Stats

1. Number of bicycles stolen by a cycle shop owner dubbed the "world's most prolific bike thief" by Canadian police: **2,865**
2. Size of the world's largest potato crisp, a 920-calorie snack produced by Pringles in 1991:  
**25x14 inches, the size of 80 standard Pringles**
3. Winning eBay bid for a fossilised insect which was subsequently discovered to belong to an unknown species of aphid: **£20**
4. Distance, from Earth, of the furthest object (a gamma ray burst named GRB 080319 after the date of its sighting) to be seen with the naked human eye: **7.5 billion light years**
5. Year in which most executions occurred within American prisons: **1935, with 199 people put to death**
6. Number of hours Britons spend 'faffing about' every day: **about two hours and forty minutes**
7. Number of McDonalds Big Mac burgers eaten since 1972 by an OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) sufferer who claims they are one of his compulsions: **23,000**
8. Number of hits received by a web site showing a rap explaining the nature of CERN's Large Hadron Collider, during its first day online: **50,000**
9. Valuation given to a 14th century gold watch previously owned by Einstein and due to be sold at auction: **\$30,000**
10. Number of Google Earth images analysed in a German university study attempting to determine if grazing cattle stand most often on a North-South axis: **8,510**
11. Age of Jenny, the world's oldest gorilla who died in captivity on 4th September this year: **55 years**
12. Winning bid for a piece of 130 million year old dinosaur dung, bought at auction by a company producing products to treat pet waste, to allegedly motivate its employees: **\$960**
13. Thickness of the Millennium Dome roof: a fabric stretched between twelve support masts: **1mm**
14. Length of the 'up' escalator at Angel underground station, Islington, down which Norwegian athlete Peter Olenick skied in 2007: **196ft, dropping a total of 90ft**
15. Date upon which the emergency number 999, the world's oldest emergency call service, was first introduced:  
**30th June 1937 (after five women died in a London fire in 1935)**
16. Annual number of hoax calls received by emergency call operators: **16.1 million, or 52% of the total number of calls**
17. Duration of the 4500 mile journey from Alberta (Canada) to Hawaii undertaken annually by around 15,000 pigs, often forced to lie on top of each other in minimally ventilated transport crates, in temperatures approaching 100 degrees:  
**around 9 days (before existing in crowded pens for up to two weeks before slaughter)**
18. Duration of the cheapest flight from Calgary (Alberta) to Honolulu (Hawaii), complete with air conditioning, 32-36 inches of leg room (seat pitch), food from an onboard café and on-demand television: **8 hours 40 minutes**
19. Number of women married to a Nigerian Muslim cleric: **86**
20. Number of dominoes knocked over after a sparrow inadvertently flew into a world record 'domino toppling' attempt: **23,000. (The sparrow was subsequently cornered and shot by an angry competitor)**
21. Distance over which a dog clung to the front of a moving Peugeot 306 car before being discovered: **60 miles**
22. Total worldwide annual mortality attributable to inadequate consumption of fruit and vegetables: **up to 2.7 million**
23. Number of golf balls surgically removed from the stomach of Oscar, a five year old black Labrador, after his owner noticed a suspicious rattling noise coming from the pet: **13**
24. Estimated sum paid by an American woman who rented two rotary telephones from AT&T for 42 years: **over \$14,000**
25. Number of individuals employed by Google: **around 20,000**

## Sources

1 Ananova; 2 *The Guinness Book of World Records*; 3 Slashdot; 4 World Science; 5 US Bureau of Justice Statistics; 6 Learning and Skills Council; 7 MSNBC; 8 *Telegraph*; 9 Agence France-Presse; 10 The Register; 11 Associated Press; 12 CNN; 13, *The Lancet*, Volume 355, January 2000; 14, 21 BBC News; 15 BT; 16 *PublicTechnology.net*; 17 *The Independent*; 18 *Expedia.com*; 19 Reuters; 20, 23 *The Guardian*; 22 *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation 2005*; 24 *USA Today*; 25 The Associated Press.

*Skeptical Stats* is compiled by **Mark Williams**, with thanks to the *Tech Goddess* for contributions.

Both *Hits & Misses* and *Skeptical Stats* depend heavily on reader contributions of clippings, story leads, and odd statistics. Please do send any interesting articles or opinions to [mark.williams@gold.ac.uk](mailto:mark.williams@gold.ac.uk), post a comment in our blog at [ukskeptic.livejournal.com](http://ukskeptic.livejournal.com), or send in by post to the address on the masthead (p. 3). Contributions are gratefully received and cited with your names.

# The Messengers of Lily Dale: An Analysis of Modern Spiritualist Mediums

**Benjamin Radford** recounts his experience at a mediumship retreat in the USA

LILY DALE is a small town in southwestern New York, about an hour from Buffalo on the wooded shores of Cassadaga Lake. It is a beautiful and serene place dotted with flowers and quaint houses with cats sleeping in windows. It is also home to Lily Dale Assembly, the oldest and largest Spiritualist community in the United States. Spiritualists are a religious group who believe that people continue to exist even after death. Some Spiritualists claim to be mediums with the ability to contact the dead. A medium, according to the philosophy of Spiritualism, “is sensitive to vibrations from the Spirit World and through whose instrumentality intelligences in that world are able to convey messages and produce the phenomena of Spiritualism” (NSAC, 1994). Many houses hang shingles offering healing or messages from the dead. Workshops are held each year, drawing speakers on topics such as past-life regression,

**More than 20,000 people visit Lily Dale each year; some come for the lectures, others for spiritual guidance, and still others for contact with dead loved ones.**

astrology, spirit communication, angel contact, therapeutic touch, and ESP. Internationally known speakers and self-proclaimed psychics lecture to sell-out crowds.

More than 20,000 people visit Lily Dale each year; some come for the lectures, others for spiritual guidance, and still others for contact with dead loved ones. Guest mediums join the dozen or so permanent resident clairvoyants to offer free daily ‘message services’ to the visitors at a place called Inspiration Stump. The Stump can be found in a clearing a short distance into the woods, with rows of wooden benches facing a large cement block shaped like a giant tree stump. Sunlight trickles through the high trees and onto the filled benches, providing a beautiful and inspiring setting for contacting dead people.

I attended a message service there with my colleagues

Joe Nickell and Kevin Christopher. The service began with a prayer, giving thanks for the area and the beauty of nature (the ‘sacred space’) surrounding us. The audience of about 200 people was about 80 percent female, mostly middle-aged, middle class whites. A few black people were present, as well as a handful of teenagers and young adults. After finishing the prayer, the leader reminded everyone to “pay attention because someone else’s message may be our own.”

One by one, six clairvoyant mediums were introduced and got up in front of the stump. Twenty-eight audience members got readings from the mediums over the course of about an hour. The mediums usually began by picking someone out of the crowd and asking, “May I touch with you?” This “touching” was not physical, but simply a Spiritualist term for doing a reading. The mediums also frequently asked to hear their subjects’ voices, saying: “It helps the vibration.”

There have been several good articles written about mediums and their responses, in particular those by Richard Wiseman (Wiseman, Jeffreys, Smith, & Nyman, 1999; Wiseman & O’Keeffe, 2001), Joe Nickell (1998, 2000, 2001), and Peter Greasley (2000). These discuss techniques used by mediums to give the illusion of providing information from the dead (mostly cold reading and clever answering); my intent here is to give the readers a feel for the people, setting, and techniques involved in Spiritualist communication with the dead.

## The Readings

I found that the readings that the mediums gave fell into several broad, sometimes overlapping, categories:

1. *Banal Responses.* These typically gave very general information that said little of substance or that likely apply to most people (e.g., “you are sometimes moody”), or that common sense would suggest (e.g., “Grandpa had health problems”), or words of encouragement (i.e., “Dad says he loves you”). At times, seemingly specific information was given by the medium, such as when the first medium said, “You like to be by water, especially moving water.” Of course, most people like to be by moving water: a waterfall, a beach, a lake, a river, etc. Still water, such as from a puddle or toilet, usually doesn’t stir people’s emotions the way moving water does.

Banal responses such as this are curious because they

bring up the question of why, during the rather remarkable experience of actually delivering messages from beyond death, the dead person would bother to bring up such trite information such as that the subject likes water. I hope that if I am ever truly contacted by a loved one from the spirit world, I will get messages of somewhat greater importance.

2. *"Fishing Expeditions."* These are responses in the form of questions, designed to elicit a positive identification from the subject (e.g., "do you know anyone with a 'J' or 'G' in their name?"). Frequently the mediums started out motioning to groups of people, thereby increasing their odds of getting a "hit." The more people they can apply their information to, the more likely it is that someone will have an uncle named Simon or a cat that died.

### Guest mediums ... offer free daily 'message services' to the visitors at a place called Inspiration Stump

3. *Incorrect Responses.* When the mediums do get specific, these responses are sometimes incorrect (e.g., "you have stomach problems"). In those wrong answers, the mediums frequently went to great – and at times comical – lengths to rationalize why their obviously wrong response was in fact correct.

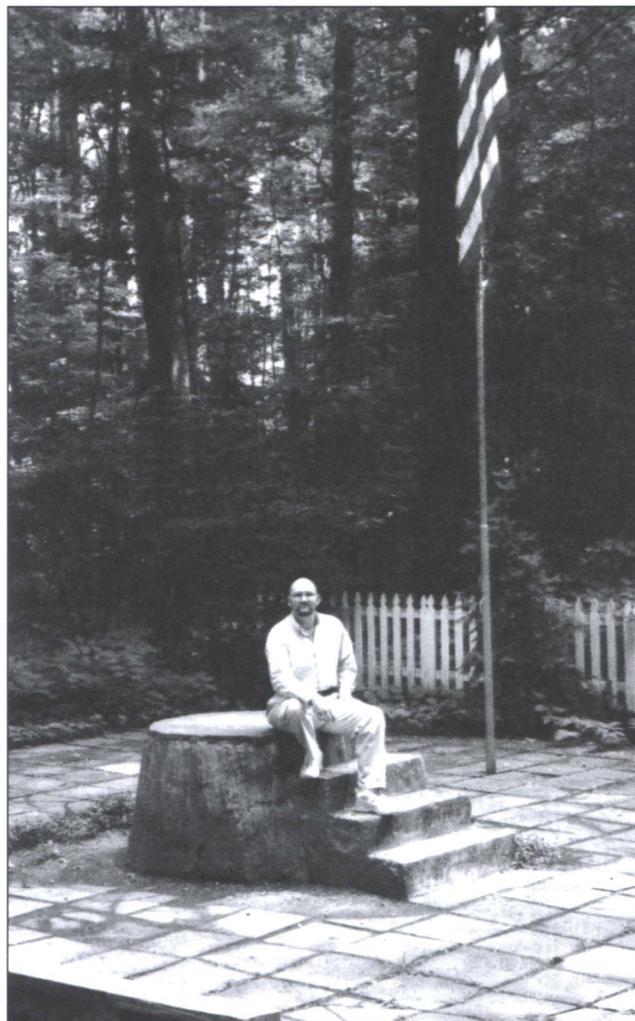
4. *Detailed Responses.* At times the mediums described vivid images, for example "a lady played checkers with you" – which was wrong – or "do you have another grandfather who speaks French?" – which was right.

For the sake of brevity I have omitted a few of the banal and fishing responses in favour of discussing information that the subjects could verify. In some places I have added my comments, but the reader is invited to read over the responses to make their own judgments.

1. The first medium, a woman from Rochester, New York, told her first subject that "I see you are a friend of animals... You need to protect your heart more... You help others, but you need to take care of you." (Banal responses: Most women like animals, and likely everyone can think of a relationship where he or she should have

"protected their heart more"; however, each person may interpret the phrase to fit with their past experience.)

She told the second subject about an Uncle Al who wore a suit from the 1950s and a fake diamond ring. When the subject replied that she had no uncle named Al, the medium hedged, "I don't know if it is your uncle... But he is coming to you because you are in turmoil and will be facing a choice... Go with your heart." (Banal and detailed but incorrect responses: Most people constantly face some sort of choice in their lives. And why would the spirit of *someone else's* Uncle Al appear?)



*Benjamin Radford sitting on Inspiration Stump.*

2. The second medium, a thin blonde woman in her sixties, started out by motioning to the left-hand side of the benches. "Somebody in these first four rows..." she said. "Somebody from out of town? Somebody who is watching your house?" The people in those rows looked at each other with puzzlement for about five seconds. No one fit that description. Luckily for the medium, a black woman sitting eight rows back – about 100 feet away – pointed to her daughter and said, "She was sitting there." The medium nodded and continued her reading, promising good health. (Apparently the spirits

get confused when someone simply gets up and moves. If that's true, one wonders how the spirits keep track from person to person and group to group.)

She pointed to another subject, a man, saying, "Somebody with glasses... Or going to get glasses... Or needs glasses." Though this description will fit most people, it apparently meant nothing to the man. Finally the medium moved on, saying, "It has nothing to do with glasses. I am getting colored names..." (Fishing and detailed but incorrect responses: If the message has "nothing to do with glasses," why did she repeatedly ask about them?)

3. A thin, blonde British woman in her sixties took over, and her first reading was for Joe Nickell. She told Joe that "things will be coming together, looking into the future with ideas of your own... In three to four years you will be successful with your own ideas." She also mentioned that his father is looking down over him from above and that "the business is the way to go."

The next subject was told, "I feel you trying to make new decisions... you are a good planner... When you plan well, the outcome is good." The subject asked about her health, and was told: "If you do as you are told you will be fine." (Banal response: The woman is



*The wooded serene atmosphere of Lily Dale.*

"Green or Brown or White?" she then called to the group in front of her. A woman raised her hand and said her last name was White. "Do you have a wedding to get to?" the medium asked. The subject responded yes, and the medium asked if she knew why she was going to the wedding. The subject didn't respond, so the medium finished up by telling her that she would spend more on the wedding than she had planned to. (Banal and detailed correct responses: The colour question is clever, and almost guaranteed to get positive responses. Not only does it cover anyone named Green, Brown, or White, but possibly (for example) Whyte, Wight, Black, Redd, and the female first name Violet. Possible 'hits' might be generated if a deceased loved one was known for favouring any particular colour, or for example for wearing a favourite white suit, hat, or other piece of clothing. The medium was correct about the wedding, though out of a crowd of 200 it's likely that at least a few had been invited to weddings.)

told she will be healthy as long as she does what she is told. But what does that really mean? As long as she's told by whom? Friends? Family? Doctors? If the woman smokes, is overweight, or drives without a seatbelt, she is already not doing what she has been "told" by medical experts. Presumably the medium means to follow her doctor's advice, which is generally a good idea, but did she really need to contact the dead to get such commonsense advice? Note also that the responsibility is thus placed on the patient: The medium is essentially telling the subject that if she gets sick, it's her own fault.)

4. A small Asian woman in a red dress began by calling on a teenage girl in the front row. Apparently confirming the information she was getting from the spirit world, she asked, "Are you in high school?" The girl nodded yes. The medium was pleased to confirm this obvious inference and gave sage advice: "Don't be talk-

ing about marriage or relationships... Dating is fine but don't let boys control your life." (Banal responses.)

She then asked a man if he was an executive director. He said no. "Do you work in an office?" "No." "Do you wear a suit at a desk, because I see a lot of paperwork on a desk." Again the man shook his head. "No." "Did you start a new job?" "Yes." After getting one right answer out of four, the medium seemed pleased with her success. "Well, I am right then," she proclaimed. (Detailed and incorrect responses: She did get one right, but since the medium gave no time frame, the "new job" could have begun weeks or months before.)

To another woman, the medium said, "I am getting a woman who says she did work in an office. She wants to encourage you in the workplace." The subject didn't seem to understand, so the medium explained that the dead woman had had limited career opportunities as a young woman and wanted to encourage the subject to take advantage of women's social progress. "I sense an old man who had dentures that didn't fit very well, and that you would walk around the house and see dentures on the tables..." When that description also didn't match anyone she knew, the medium went on: "Another man, I'm getting a 'G.' Greg? Gus? Garth? I'm



*Benjamin Radford, Joe Nickell, and Kevin Christopher just behind Inspiration Stump*

A woman was asked if she had a strong open relationship with her mother. "Is she always there for you? Are you going for your master's [degree]?" The woman said yes, and the medium told her she would do well at her job. (Banal and detailed correct responses.)

5. A heavysset blonde woman began with a woman in front of her, saying, "I see a gentleman. His name starts with an 'H'..." When the woman said she didn't know anyone who had died whose name began with an 'H', the medium tried to salvage her reading: "This is not him, someone like a nephew to you... this person is a symbol of work, he wants to be an entrepreneur." She said the spirit would guide the woman in her business. She also spoke of "a lady who had hearing difficulty, but never admitted it. She turned her head to hear..." At this the woman enthusiastically agreed, recalling an older person who did that. (Incorrect and banal responses.)

getting a 'Gr.'... not a father, someone you wouldn't have known." (Incorrect and fishing responses: The subject still didn't know who the medium was talking about. And why would a spirit of a person unknown to the subject show up at all? If I'm going to the trouble to contact the dead, I'd want my relatives and loved ones sending messages, not some stranger's spirit giving me information because he's lonely or bored.)

For the next woman the medium claimed to hear messages from an older woman. "A relative of yours passed with emphysema or cancer... I'm getting a lady, an old-fashioned lady with a checkerboard." (The subject was puzzled.) "She played checkers with you when you were a little girl... I'm getting an 'L... Ellen? Louise? Helen?" Once again, the woman knew no one fitting that name. The medium went on: "Is there a man with a lost limb? A lower leg with a cane?" (The subject shook her head, unable to think of anyone like that.) "He had a problem with his head or emphy-

sema...” The subject finally thought of an old man who had died with a lung problem, and the medium added, “He is showing a move, maybe a real estate move.” (Banal and detailed but incorrect responses.)

6. The last medium, a large woman in denim with her hair in a bun and bright red rimmed glasses, began by calling to a man standing alongside the benches. “Do you know anyone named Joe or Joseph?” The man nodded and replied, “My grandfather.” “Do you have another who speaks French?” “My other grandfather,” the man said, visibly impressed. “You will do more work in a creative field... you are going to get a lot of offers, but you have to pace yourself.” (Fishing and correct responses.)

To an overweight black woman near the back, she

**... it is nearly impossible to tell if those claiming psychic powers actually believe in their abilities or not.**

Asked: “Do you know a Meg or Megra?” The woman said no. “I am seeing diabetes... The person who passed was not good at taking her medicine.” “I have diabetes,” the woman said. (The medium nodded as though the woman had confirmed her information. But notice that the medium implied that the dead person had diabetes, not the subject herself – and overweight African Americans are at very high risk for diabetes.) The medium continued: “It is about your female friend who you are concerned about, and her relationships. You have to get real clear, it is not about love it is about what’s practical... she has to pay attention to her future... make sure about the education, focus on that.” (Banal and fishing responses.)

The final reading went to a man in the very back. “You come from a family of go-for-its,” she said. The man nodded. “I see a lot of problems in the stomach area, maybe stress... you work with structured, legal things... but there is a part of you that is very creative, you have an artistic lean to you. Are there three projects going on now? (“Yes”) Is there something to do in the

house? (“Absolutely”) You’ll get it done. Just remember to go out and have fun.” (Banal and detailed correct responses.)

**Analysis**

The readings relied a lot on the Barnum effect, in which general statements applicable to everyone are thought to apply specifically to one person. This is seen in many sun sign horoscopes, and works in part because people selectively recall instances which fit the trait or characteristic described. For example, if a medium or psychic tells you that you are good with your hands or are a good planner, most people can recall times when that was true of them and agree. But in doing so they ignore the other times when the opposite is also true.

As the crowd left, I overheard a conversation among three women, one of whom had gone to a private session with a medium earlier that day. She was not pleased with her session, claiming it to be “lousy” and “horrible.” The woman told her companions: “She [the medium, confirming her spirit information] asked if I was Irish. I said, ‘No, I’m English,’ and she said, ‘That’s close enough!” Close enough for an ill-informed Lily Dale Spiritualist perhaps, but not close enough for the subject, who did not accept the medium’s clumsy attempt to validate her incorrect answer. As this magazine’s readers are well aware, England and Ireland are two very distinct and separate countries and cultures, and the woman was offended at the medium’s response. Surely a deceased English person would feel the same way. The response or message that English and Irish were “close enough” clearly came not from the spirit of a dead English person but a live medium with typical American myopia. More commonly, of course, the messages are of love and comfort, which are sure bets coming from dead loved ones. Many of the responses seemed less like actual messages from the dead than generic advice and reassuring sentiments.

In this regard responses from the dead are similar to responses from Facilitated Communication (Dillon, 1993; Mulick, Jacobson, & Kobe, 1993). In this analogy, the medium represents the facilitator, and the dead represent the autistic child, unable to speak for himself. A simple test was conducted to see where the message was coming from (i.e., was the child really communicating, or was the facilitator generating the messages?). When the child was asked questions that only he knew (but the facilitator didn’t), the child was unresponsive or gave incorrect answers; similarly, when the facilitator and child were shown two pictures, he only responded correctly when the same pictures were also seen by the facilitator. In short, it was clear that the facilitators were fooling themselves and simply typing out what they thought the child would say. In the same way, (assuming for a moment that contacting the dead is impossible) mediums must make up, guess, or infer what the dead would say to the listener.

All in all, the readings were fascinating. Though clearly non-supernatural techniques were at work in generating responses, it does not necessarily follow that the mediums were being intentionally deceptive. A (perhaps too) charitable explanation is that techniques of cold reading are being used unconsciously. Many psychics and healers genuinely believe they have paranormal powers, and there is no reason to assume that mediums are any different. Mediums may in fact believe that whatever images, messages, and feelings that pop into their heads during spirit communication come not from themselves but from the spirit realm.

As Nickell (2000) has noted, the shift in mediumship from the physical (producing phenomena such as floating spirit trumpets, for example) to the mental has served as an effective way to cloak the medium's true intentions. Except in rare cases where mediums admit fakery (as M. Lamar Keene did with his book *The Psychic Mafia*), it is nearly impossible to tell if those claiming psychic powers actually believe in their abilities or not. Regardless of whether the mediums themselves do, many visitors believe in – and act on – guidance from the dead.

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## SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Skeptics in the Pub is an evening held once a month (in a pub, strangely enough) for anybody who has an interest in, or is sceptical about, the paranormal, science and/or religion. Each month an invited speaker gives a talk on their chosen specialisation. The talk is followed by an informal discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere. You can find out more about the meetings on *The Skeptic* website: <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub>. This includes directions and maps to the Penderel's Oak pub, where the London branch meet up. You can also find details there of the meetings for the Leicester and Leeds branches. Alternatively, please contact Sid Rodrigues: 07818 443 735, [pub@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:pub@skeptic.org.uk). The meeting begins at 7:00 pm and there is a suggested donation of £2.00.

## THE PARKING LOT IS FULL

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



In 1953, eminent scientist Viktor Von Klaus managed to stimulate telepathy in himself. Tragically, Dr. Von Klaus went insane soon after and drowned while attempting to breathe underwater. (The goldfish went on to win the Nobel Prize for Physics.)

## THE PARKING LOT IS FULL

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



Brad Palmer once thought of his ESPenis as a miracle, but as time wore on, it became clear that the application of its psychic powers was actually quite limited.



## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

**SCEPTICISM ISN'T** just for the big things in life – or after it for that matter. People who might otherwise be ready to embrace scepticism could be put off by the thought that they will forever be debating the reality of UFOs, debunking psychics and tut-tutting about homeopaths. Personally, however, the thing I am most passionately sceptical about is modern food culture. I even have a top ten of contemporary food crimes.

1. *Pot Noodles*. Food should serve one of at least three purposes: provide nourishment, fill a hole or provide pleasure. On all three counts, Pot Noodles fall short. They taste like soggy laminated cardboard in a marinade of diluted potato crisp flavouring and are no more nutritious. They are proof, if proof were needed, that there is nothing so foul that the British won't ingest it.

2. *Margarine*. This word is slowly being consigned to history, replaced by euphemisms such as "low fat spread", "hydrogenated vegetable oil" or "totaciously butterific delight". Whatever you call it, how did people get the idea that industrially thickened vegetable oil was healthier than natural butter? Now they even make it with olive oil, associating it with the benefits of the Mediterranean diet, when the traditional Italian would no sooner put margarine on her ciabatta than she would holiday in Germany.

3. *Instant coffee*. When whole populations come to think of a foodstuff as being synonymous with its bastard derivatives, a true crime against cuisine has been committed. Only recently has the population at large finally admitted that whatever instant coffee is, it isn't really coffee. But still it sells better than the real thing and when people drink ground coffee in cafés, they do so in the form of over-milked lattes and super-frappaccinos that seem designed to smother the aroma of the sacred roasted bean.

4. *Dutch tomatoes*. The tomato is at the heart of the Mediterranean diet. This simple fruit is versatile, packed with flavour, and is as good cooked for hours as the base of a pasta sauce as it is simply sliced and drizzled with olive oil. That was, until the Dutch came along and started producing flavourless, under-ripe, rock hard varieties that transformed a simple everyday delight into a bland, tasteless wonder.

5. *Healthy eating ranges*. "Be good to yourself", implores one supermarket's so-called healthy eating range. I agree. Do yourself a favour and never buy one of these monstrous perversions again. Just look at what's in them. Water and corn starch usually, plus a mass of flavourings and additives to cover up what has been taken out. If you want to lose weight, just eat less of the real thing.

6. *Wholemeal pasta*. You must really hate yourself to eat this stuff. Traditional pasta is a wholesome, tasty low-fat product made of durum wheat, which is a naturally good source of fibre, even in its white form. Wholemeal pasta, on the other hand, tastes foul and was only developed by misguided or cynical fools who think that any wheat-based product which isn't wholemeal must be bad for you.

7. *French Golden Delicious*. English apples are the best in the world. But they can look a little rough and they are quite small. So surely it must be better to eat cheap, smooth, flawless, large, crunchy varieties from over the channel. Never mind the taste, which has all of the sweet acidity of an apple with all the other flavours stripped out. Let's hear it for bland reliability.

8. *Chicken tikka pizza*. They do really exist, alongside Hawaiian, Mexican and Chinese versions of the Italian classic. The crime here isn't against authenticity: innovation is at the heart of culinary evolution. It's rather the total disregard for the suitability of mixing flavours and cuisines. The idea must be that if chicken tikka is nice, and so is pizza, a chicken tikka pizza must be even better than both. But then in our have-it-all-now culture, maybe that doesn't seem such an odd logic after all.

9. *Harvester restaurants*. It's a bit unfair to single out Harvester 'restaurants' and leave Garfunkels et al. off the hook. So let's not. This charge is against a whole sector of the 'leisure industry', the menus of which look remarkably similar to the chilled cabinets of prepared meals found in supermarkets. It's not that the food there is always bad, it's just that it's no better, and often worse, than a ready meal, which is not surprising, because many of the dishes are at least part-prepared off-site. Indeed, such establishments even make a virtue of the fact that you could be eating the same at home by reassuring us that the cakes are made by Sarah Lee or that the custard is by Birds. Which invites the question, why not just stay at home?

10. *Health food shops*. A health food shop should be a greengrocer's, a fishmonger's, or even a quality butcher's. But instead the moniker is attached to strange places where lots of bottles of pills and tonics are sold, alongside boxes of dried goods manufactured industrially and which require rehydration before they are edible. Very little is fresh and very little comes in its natural state.

Now I ask you, do you really think that psychics and naturopaths are more of a threat to civilised society than the combined evil of these food crimes? Come on, sceptics! Let's get angry about what really matters!

Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* ([www.philosophers.co.uk](http://www.philosophers.co.uk)) and author of *The Pig that Wants to be Eaten and 99 Other Thought Experiments* (Granta), *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (Oxford University Press) and *The Meaning of Life* (Granta). Julian's latest book is *Welcome to Everytown: A Journey into the English Mind* (Granta). See [www.julianbaggini.com](http://www.julianbaggini.com).

Comments welcome to [julian@julianbaggini.com](mailto:julian@julianbaggini.com)

# Through a Glass Darkly

Michael Heap



## Why-Fi

READERS MAY have noticed the change in the title of this column, which used to be *ASKE News*. The new title relates to a point I often make and have made in one of my previous pieces. In answer to the question, "Why are you a sceptic?" I can do no better than utter the words "Because real, reliable truths about the world are very difficult to acquire". Metaphorically "we see through a glass darkly", meaning that much of the information we receive about the world is fragmented, distorted or simply wrong. Likewise, so is its representation in our perceptions, beliefs and memories. The reason for this change of title is simply that when the editors of *The Skeptic* notify me that copy is due there sometimes isn't much ASKE news to announce! But there are still plenty of things I could write about instead.

I was in fact planning this time to air some thoughts around the topic of foreign aid to Africa, in view of a recent television programme that once again revealed that much of it never gets as far as the suffering, starving and destitute. However, I have been distracted by alarming news from Glastonbury, courtesy of an ASKE Member there. This concerns "a health danger" in that part of the world, but before I go to the main story, let's look at what Glastonbury's Natural Health Centre has to contribute on the subject.

On their website (<http://www.glastonburynatural-health.co.uk>) they advise us of the ill-effects experienced by sufferers of the health hazard in question. The short term symptoms are as follows: problems with concentration/memory loss; mental confusion; dizziness; flu-like symptoms; depression; nausea; headaches; muscle/joint pain; unusual fatigue/apathy; eye irritation/pain; general skin problems/rashes; warmth/redness/burning sensation in areas of the body; sleep disturbance; (and finally.....) behavioural changes.

My immediate reaction to this catalogue of human malaise is the realisation that I can sign up to quite a number of these symptoms myself. But I am confused. In the past I've been given to understand by the 'natural health' industry that such a diverse range of ill-effects is due to overwork. Or food allergy. Or food additives. Or mercury in my fillings. But this time it's none of these. Could it be a vitamin or mineral deficiency? Wheat intolerance? Dehydration? Nowhere near. What about too much caffeine? Environmental

noise maybe? Bad posture? My water supply? Blockages of negative energy? The presence of a restless spirit in my house? How about the misalignment of my furniture and fittings in relation to the principles of Feng Shui? Not even warm!

No, the answer is that it's all to do with wi-fi networks. In May 2008, Glastonbury became the first place in the country to have a public wi-fi system. This allows people to automatically connect to the internet in public places. The service is part of a larger project that will be rolled out in other towns in Somerset over the next few years. At the time of writing, the scheme is undergoing a six-month review (<http://www.thisissomerset.co.uk>).

Some residents are angry and concerned and want the system removed. They believe that the network is causing "serious health problems" and has long-term health implications. One resident likens it to "a game of tennis with the health of vulnerable people". Another claims that people are getting "headaches and dizziness and rashes" and says, "I began to get pain around the back of the head low down in April and it wasn't until June that I found out about the effects of wi-fi on the biological system". One resident has presented a petition of 400 names of people who want the service to be removed; she herself has moved house, along with her young family, because of her fears for their health. Another person complains that "she has to wear a protective crystal to stop the wi-fi from interfering with her body's own electromagnetic field".

Glastonbury Natural Health Centre is the base for the 'Glastonbury Why Wi-Fi Campaign'. Their website provides a map giving the locations of the six wi-fi stations in the town centre. They urge people to let them know if they think they are *electrosensitive* and suffering from the ill effects of wi-fi. "We are compiling a stories page for this web-site so please email me with a short description of your experience. We also recommend that you report your symptoms to your doctor".

So, if any readers are experiencing symptoms like those listed earlier, please let Glastonbury Natural Health Centre know. On their website you'll see a snapshot of a group of cheerful and robust-looking protesters who are a credit to their community, and a vivid testament to the benefits and privileges of living in that delightful part of the world.

Now where did I put those photographs of Somalia...?

**Michael Heap** is the Chairman of ASKE and a clinical and forensic psychologist in Sheffield. ASKE email address = [general@aske.org.uk](mailto:general@aske.org.uk)  
ASKE website = <http://www.aske.org>

# Reviews



## HIDEY HO HUM

### Occult London

by Merlin Coverley

Pocket Essentials, £9.99 (hb), ISBN 978-1-904048-88-6

It's hard to see the purpose of this book, which offers no new insights or information, just a series of potted biographies of people and groups in London, some more occult than others, padded with historical background.

Even for a reader with no knowledge of the occult, this would be an insubstantial introduction. It frequently mentions works by, for example, Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair but this only points up the book's inadequacies and how much more could be learnt from reading them.

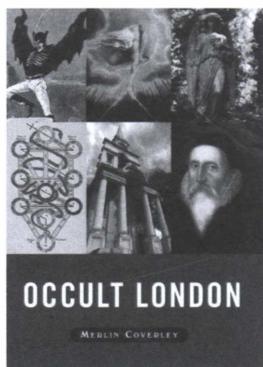
The Mary Glover witchcraft case in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century doesn't even mention which part of London it happened in and appears randomly chosen. The section on William Blake offers little more than a quick skip through his life and a list of London addresses that could just as easily be found on Wikipedia.

The author describes the occult as "a continuous history which unfolds, largely unacknowledged..." He claims to "rediscover [the] hidden history, unearthing the secret city and its forgotten inhabitants" and states that the occult "comes to symbolise those neglected quarters of the city and their forgotten histories". Exactly who has forgotten such high-profile figures as John Dee, Hawksmoor, William Blake or Aleister Crowley and places like Spitalfields or Highgate Cemetery? It's less a case of unearthing secrets than "round up the usual suspects". To be fair, Spring-Heeled Jack is less well-known but not really an occult figure, more an urban legend.

The Appendix lists various parts of London with occult associations but these are flimsily covered and consist mostly of general historical information, for example, the Hawksmoor church in Bloomsbury and the (now gone) Mother Red Cap pub in Camden. The entry on Tyburn has more about the nuns who currently live in a small convent there than its occult past.

The size of the book is no excuse; another Pocket Essential, *The History of Witchcraft* by Lois Martin, manages to be scholarly and readable, neatly summing up the main points without skimping on detail. This book does none of those things.

Tessa Kendall

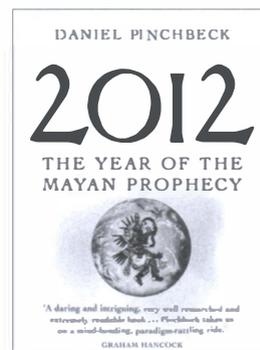


ally complex case for the genuine significance of this crisis. He argues (in the tradition of Capra, etc.) that Mayan ideas about the upcoming changes coincide not only with similar traditions in other, supposedly unrelated, cultures but also, dramatically, with modern scientific notions (suggesting much greater sophistication than mainstream scholars would attribute to the Maya). Humanity, he says, should modify its world-view so as to be ready for these changes and to move into a radically different future, embracing ecological imperatives (inevitably!) and accepting overtly spiritual aspects of existence.

Although Pinchbeck is well-informed on some of the relevant issues and at times sober and even scholarly, large sections of his book are intensely emotional and indeed personal and subjective; parts are semi-autobiographical. While revealing, this element of the work is distracting to the modernist scholar, and must often be factored out in attempts to assess the claims made. The vastly multi-disciplinary scope of the work also hinders evaluation by any one reader, given the (only partly beneficial) specialisation of modern scholarship.

Pinchbeck has rather little to say about matters within my own professional expertise (linguistics), but it has to be said that where he does address such points he displays only a very scanty awareness of the discipline, accepting too readily any points that appear to support his case and failing to acknowledge associated problems. For instance, he uses the dated and highly unreliable etymological methods typical of the fringe (e.g., pp. 202-203, where he follows the eccentric Arguelles on links between the word "Maya" and superficially similar words from other cultures); he accepts an extreme interpretation of Chomsky's points about the allegedly mysterious origins of language, and indeed ignores the strong cases made within linguistics against Chomskyan ideas generally (p. 174); he accepts as probably valid Stevenson's ideas about reincarnation without acknowledging the weakness of the linguistic arguments prominently used in their support (pp. 171-172). This is the area I myself know best, and Pinchbeck's performance here does not inspire any confidence at all.

And, more generally, even a non-expert can observe that Pinchbeck's presentation is often fatally one-sided. He accepts the reality of spiritual entities and paranormal phenomena, treating writers such as Radin as authoritative (pp. 36-38, etc.) and ignoring persuasive sceptical criticisms of this kind of work; he displays exaggerated respect for 'deep ecological' thinking (pp. 5-8, etc.) and for traditional myths (pp. 10-11, etc.); he repeats the common but much overstated condemnation of mainstream scientists and sceptics as hidebound (p. 5, 11, etc.). Although it seems highly unlikely that a major crisis specifically centred on December 2012 really looms, Pinchbeck may perhaps have an arguable case for some of his more specific claims. But, unless he can disengage his emotions somewhat and consider more fairly the weighty objections to the ideas that he favours, he will not persuade the sceptical or scientifically-trained reader.



## LONG SHOT

### 2012: The Year Of The Mayan Prophecy

by Daniel Pinchbeck

Piatkus, £9.99 (pb), ISBN-10: 0749927607

Many non-mainstream thinkers are currently focusing on the now familiar fact that the 5000-year Mayan "Long Count" reaches an end-point in December 2012. In this book, Pinchbeck presents an unusu-

Mark Newbrook

## COME AGAIN?

### The Paperback Apocalypse: how the Christian Church was left behind

by Robert M. Price

Prometheus Books, £12.99 (pb), ISBN-10: 1591025834

This book could probably only have been published in America, though it may not be as widely read there as it should be. The obsession of American fundamentalists with eschatology – beliefs about the end of the world – seems as tenacious as ever and Robert Price, a professor of scriptural studies, examines in detail these beliefs and their origins in mistaken interpretations of the New Testament.

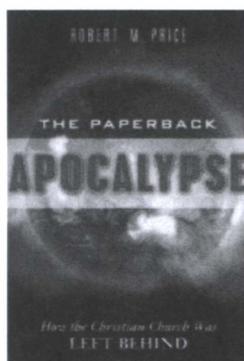
Ideas such as the Rapture, Messianic Prophecy, the Antichrist, and the Second coming are central to the evangelical world view and form the basis of a corporate eschatology, in which whole groups of the saved will simultaneously vanish from the earth, leaving their clothes behind, along with the unbelievers who will have to face the last judgment. How do you ensure you are among the saved? Simple: just stop being an intellectual (i.e. stop thinking) and accept the Bible as literal historical truth, forgetting all those nit-picking interpretations of what it might all have meant in another time and context.

The Second Coming is of course the one great testable prediction of Christianity and has been falsified as often as it has been made, so why does the belief persist? Currently fashionable is the theory of preterism: the New Testament prophecies, including the Second Coming have already been fulfilled, we have just not noticed or understood them. There are after all plenty of candidates for the role of Antichrist. Just think of Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin.

Underneath all this is a heady psychological brew of paranoia, delusions of grandeur and persecution complex: true Christians are hated simply for being Christians, only we have seen the truth, the whole world is wrong (and we look forward to seeing you suffer when the end does finally come). In the last two decades, though, there has been less emphasis on the Second coming and more on the world as it is, as fundamentalists have abandoned their indifference to electoral politics, with the predictable malign effects on American society. There is a detailed overview of the many Apocalypse and Antichrist novels from both secular and religious publishing houses in America, including the *Left Behind* series by LaHaye and Jenkins.

*Apocalypse* is fairly scholarly in tone but with a leavening of humour, and is a useful guide to the evangelical/fundamentalist scene in America. There is a lengthy scripture index for those of you who can be bothered to argue with your local Holy Rollers the next time they come knocking on your door.

Mike Hutton



## AGAINST THE TIDE

### Counter-Knowledge: How we Surrendered to Conspiracy Theories, Quack Medicine, Bogus Science and Fake History

by Damian Thompson

Atlantic Books, £7.99 (pb), ISBN 10: 1843546760

This book is an impressive new addition to the now well-established genre of sceptical works critiquing largely irrational 'fringe' theories relating to matters of science and history, especially those which (although often absurd) manifest a degree of superficial plausibility for the non-specialist reader and have thus had unwarranted influence on public thinking and policy.

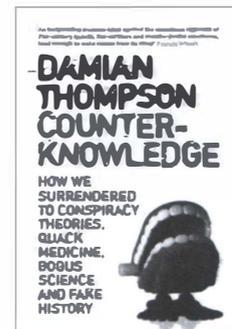
This pattern is salient in countries such as Islamic theocracies where the local culture encourages non-scientific world-views, and one feature of Thompson's book is a greater emphasis on Islamic fundamentalism than is usual (some critics plainly fear the consequences of criticising such positions). But such ideas are also very widespread indeed in 'the West', where 'alternative spirituality' (often set up as a rival to the scientific world-view) is now strong and where Christian fundamentalism and associated creationist theories have not been decisively weakened by the vast evidence supporting evolutionary theory.

Thompson rightly objects to the influence of religion (and sheer irrationality) in support of quasi-factual statements that run contrary to accumulated empirical evidence. He urges lay readers to accept genuine huge-majority consensus in mainstream academic thought as provisionally valid. And he also analyses the origins of 'counter-knowledge' of the various kinds that he surveys, and the factors which promote its acceptance. These latter include: the popularity of postmodernism and relativism in intellectual circles, the apparent complicity of universities in the 'dumbing-down' of their offerings and in dubious links with commercial organisations, and the recent technology-driven explosion of largely uncontrolled sources of misinformation.

Thompson's range is obviously wide, but I instantiate from his chapter on 'pseudohistory'. Here he discusses Menzies' popular and adroitly promoted theories about early modern Chinese influence around the world, the huge literature surrounding the Templars and their alleged legacy, various hyper-diffusionist claims about the early Americas, 'ancient astronaut' and 'lost civilisation' theories such as those of von Daniken and Hancock, and Afrocentrism. Thompson focuses very usefully on early modern non-standard thought and critiques by well-informed forerunners of the modern sceptical movement, as well as more recent sceptical sources.

There are only occasional points of concern, e.g. on p. 79, where Thompson arguably treats Rudgley's ideas as better founded than they are. But the length of the book precludes full assessment of all cases discussed by way of exemplification. In general, Thompson's book can be very highly recommended as an initial source for argumentation, and if necessary as an antidote to the kind of thinking which he critiques.

Mark Newbrook



## NOT EVEN

**Jinn from Hyperspace: And Other Scribblings - Both Serious and Whimsical**

by Martin Gardner

Prometheus Books, £17.50 (hb), ISBN-10: 1591025656

Another Gardner book is always good news, for both sceptics and aficionados of science and mathematics. Over the last fifty years, he has written nearly a hundred books, especially about mathematical puzzles and diversions. This latest volume is a collection covering a range of his own enthusiasms, which yields a slightly odd assortment in this case.

As he says himself in the Preface, he “may be the only non-Catholic admirer of Gilbert Chesterton”, and it is indeed fairly unlikely that readers of this journal would be committed readers of G. K. Chesterton’s detective fiction. In the section devoted to this writer, Gardner writes, “I’m well aware of his few faults – his unconscious anti-Semitism, his ignorance of science, his naïve political views – but I share his faith in a personal God”. For this reviewer, Gardner’s theism is as baffling as some of his famous mathematical puzzles, but it has been pointed out before that if anyone with a scientific background might be susceptible to religious belief, those from the physical sciences are more prone than those trained in biology. Gardner is greatly interested in the controversies about superstrings and twistors in theoretical physics, and in reviews of books by Roger Penrose he pursues the question of the mind, reporting approvingly that Penrose’s “little finger tells him that the human mind is more than just a collection of tiny wires and switches”.

There may be few wires in the human head, but switches and connectors abound, and they got there through natural selection, like all the other systems and components that make life possible. This process is, of course, awe-inspiring but it is also non-teleological, and it is disappointing that Gardner has never managed to realize just how dangerous, as Dennett puts it, Darwin’s idea actually is for the theistic outlook.

A typographical error in the chapter on false memory may offer a new word for a belief that is, as Wolfgang Pauli is quoted as saying later in the book, “not even wrong”: hypnotism.

Gardner’s reviews and articles on mathematics and physics are interesting enough, although there is a fair amount of repetition involved across the various texts. He defends a kind of Platonism in mathematics: the structures and theorems of mathematics are objectively real, rather than merely cultural constructions. “Penrose finds it incomprehensible (as do I) that anyone could suppose that [the Mandelbrot set] is not as much ‘out there’ as Mount Everest is, subject to exploration in the way a jungle is explored.”

The first section, *Science, Math, and Baloney*, begins with an article about the False Memory Wars, and goes on to include mathematical fiction: short stories such as *The Jinn from Hyperspace*. The section on literature, mostly concerning Chesterton, ends, unusually with an early attempt at free verse, *So Long Old Girl*, an elegy for a decommissioned warship that Gardner had served on. This is reminiscent of some of Buckminster Fuller’s poetry on industrial/technological themes, but is, unfortunately, quite unseaworthy. Gardner wisely admits as much: “I am not much of a poet”.

He is an enormously engaging writer, though, and pays tribute to two other writers in the final sections of the book. Part Three concerns L. Frank Baum, the author of *The Wizard of Oz*, and the book ends with a collection of five introductions to books by Lewis Carroll. Gardner’s closing sentence can be applied to his own work: “If you are not yet acquainted with Alice’s adventures in Wonderland and behind the mirror, read on and enjoy!”

Paul Taylor

## ENCORE!

**Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy and Culture**

by Alan Sokal

OUP, £20.00, ISBN 978-0-19-923920-7

A decade ago, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont published *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers’ Abuse of Science*, a book written to provide a context for Sokal’s glorious hoax, whereby he successfully submitted a parody of postmodern theorizing about science to the journal, *Social Text*. The journal’s editors snapped up what they took to be a valuable scoop: a professional physicist had defected, conceding that cognitive relativists and social constructivists were astute in their criticisms of the failures of scientific rationality.

Their jubilation was short-lived; Sokal came clean and confessed that the whole thing was a string of nonsense from start to finish, designed to highlight the silliest possible statements and “arguments” that had ever slipped from the word processors of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Paul Virilio and their awe-struck admirers. The academic row that followed burst onto the pages of *Le Monde*, *The New York Times* and other newspapers and journals worldwide. Unravelling the issues was the job of that book, but the work is apparently not yet done.

This new book enables the uninitiated to catch up with what they missed, but those who already support Sokal in his defence of science might need some persuading to buy it. The original parody was reprinted in *Intellectual Impostures*, and now appears yet again, but this time with extensive annotations that match the length of the parody itself. Having new annotations facing the pages of an article that already carries footnotes may seem unappetizing, and the zig-zag reading can be a slow process, but the work is somewhat enlivened by Sokal’s humour and the fact that most of the targeted claims and doctrines are just hilariously inane. In the preface, Sokal faces down the issue of repetitiveness, even though, as he admits, only three of the ten chapters have not been published elsewhere, arguing that this collection makes a coherent whole. It is a useful collection, and, moreover, many chapters are updated versions of previous texts.

The chapter, *Defense of a Modest Scientific Realism*, is a welcome summary of his position, a response to the Science Studies tribe, who say things like: “The natural world has a small or non-existent role in the construction of scientific knowledge.” Of particular interest to sceptics, however, will be the lengthy chapter, *Pseudoscience and postmodernism: Antagonists or fellow-travellers?*

Here Sokal illustrates how some zealots of pseudoscience deploy postmodernist arguments when their threadbare stocks of evidence are challenged, and how postmodernists may be so keen to disparage science in their own sceptical way that they uncritically invoke the “findings” of various pseudosciences such as homeopathy and astrology as rival forms of knowledge. In making these moves, they may of course be oblivious of the contradictions involved, or even be contemptuous of attempts to expose them. The first part of the chapter pursues these themes in the field of nursing, in the form of Therapeutic Touch and the influential ideas of Martha Rogers, while the second part explores their toxic presence in Hindu nationalism. Sokal concludes by admitting that there is less convergence of postmodernism and pseudoscience than he predicted, but maintains that, “by weakening the perceived intellectual and moral foundation for scientific thought, postmodernism abets pseudoscience and heightens [as Russell put it] the ‘ocean of insanity upon which the little barque of human reason insecurely floats’.”

The chapter ends with Sokal’s defence of his description of the Pope as “the leader of a major pseudoscientific cult”. All in all, this is a valuable and refreshing read.

Paul Taylor



# LETTERS

## An Author's Response

I don't make a habit of criticising criticism and have always found it to be somewhat infra-dig but please realise that the book *How to Start Your own Secret Society* (reviewed in *The Skeptic*, 21.2) was a mickey take of the whole subject. This included mangled mock archaic English – read any number of books on the subject, including some of those written by secret societies themselves, especially in the past, and see how close to the mark I was.

Everyone else got it bar one other reviewer who failed to get the joke as well. Please don't take this as a mean spirited attack by a put-upon writer. As an ardent sceptic (my latest book is on atheism – see a review in *The Skeptic*, 21.3), I wrote the book to have fun with a subject that everyone seemed to be putting too much stock into. The amount of nonsense and twaddle that blew up around *The Da Vinci Code* was inspiration enough.

By dedicating the book to Richard Dawkins and Carl Sagan I thought that would be clue enough to where my true intentions lay... the give away as it were. I mean the whole thing is full of pythonesque silliness and made up quotes anyway. It was even reviewed and loved by a Freemason of the Grand Lodge who thought it was a hoot and very close to the mark especially in

terms of the rituals.

I don't expect you to like the book, just understand the intentions.

**Nick Harding**  
London

## The Definition of a Sceptic

Sceptic: One who, when confronted with a dogma or an absolute, has a powerful urge to kick it in the balls.

**Ian Mason**  
Odder, Denmark

## Whose Father is the Father?

We all laugh at the White Queen, who could believe as many as ten impossible things before breakfast, but many of us probably have some contradictory opinions locked up in our minds. They survive because we seldom give them any critical examination. Occasionally, as happened to me recently, these ideas come into contact with one another, and leave us feeling "How come I never thought about this? It's very odd."

At a carol service this Christmas, a completely chance train of thought made me think for the first time of the full implications of the story of the Annunciation and the virgin birth. The claim that Jesus' parentage was of Mary and the Holy Spirit implies that the Holy Spirit was the father of Christ.

But then, if the Holy Spirit is the Father, who is the third person of the Trinity? Whose father, in other words, was the Father? Clearly the Father was not the father of Christ, as this role was already taken. So was He (the Father) the father of the Holy Spirit? In which case the Trinity consists of the Grandfather, the Grandson and the Father? Or was the Holy Spirit simply a vessel for the Father – a sort of spiritual artificial inseminator, as it were?

It was George Bernard Shaw who pointed out the contradiction between the passage in the Bible about Christ being of the line of King David, on the one hand, and the doctrine of the virgin birth (which implies that Jesus was not descended from David at all, because Joseph, who *was* descended from David, was not his biological father). But it seems to me that this Holy Spirit conundrum is much more problematic for believers, or for those like myself who attempt against the odds to keep an open mind about belief. Can anyone offer a rational justification for the traditional views about the Trinity in the light of what seems to be a clear internal contradiction in standard Christian doctrine? Am I missing something blindingly obvious here?

**Rory Allen**  
London

## The Skeptic Comes of Age!

This issue of *the Skeptic* marks an important milestone in the publication's history. We have now been producing the magazine for no less than 21 years! To mark this achievement, we have for some time been planning a major revamp of your favourite British sceptical publication (okay, we know there is not much competition!).

As from the next issue (22.1), you will get 40 pages in each copy – an increase in size of more than 40%! What is more, you will be getting some new and exciting regular columnists, new cartoons, and a regular celebrity sceptic interview (starting with the Amazing Randi himself!) in addition to all your old favourite features. We hope you like the new look and would, as ever, appreciate your comments.

Unfortunately, this is going to entail an increase in subscription rates, our first price increase since 1998 UK subscribers will have to pay £20 per year for four issues from now on and the rest of the world will have to pay £24. That's a 33% increase in cost for an increase in content of more than 40%, so we hope you will agree that the magazine is still extremely good value (full details of the new rates can be found on the back cover).

We look forward to the next 21 years and beyond!

With best wishes,  
Chris & Lindsay

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